An Interview With Joshua Fine

Back when it was announced that Joshua Fine was leaving Marvel Studios, I sent him an email asking if he would consent to a (hopefully not!) final interview on diverse subjects about Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes. He consented, and *insert Rod Sterling voice here* present this for your approval!

Q. In your time at Marvel Studios, you've basically had your hand in everything -- from AEMH to the W&tXM, from Spectacular Spider-Man to the Fantastic Four?

One of my favorite stories from college (completely true) happened late one night in the spring of my sophomore year at NYU. It was probably about 1am the night before I had a midterm in some gen-ed class that I really didn't care about and I should have been studying. Instead, I was hunched in front of my computer, circles under my eyes from lack of sleep, because I had been marathoning the entire second season of *X-Men: Evolution* which I'd never seen before. I only stumbled across the series while looking for episodes of the 90's X-Men, but after watching a few episodes, I was hooked. My roommate (still one of my best friends) shook his head disparagingly at me and asked, "Dude... which do you think is really more important? Passing your *required* class, or watching X-

Men cartoons?"

I failed that class.

My time at Marvel started shortly after that. My junior year in college I did a summer internship at Marvel Studios. This was back when they were in a tiny little office with about 11 full-time employees to 8 interns. Back then the office was small enough that the interns actually got a chance to interact quite a lot with the top executives. I was able to help out Avi Arad and Kevin Feige when the first Fantastic Four movie was in development. Spider-Man 2 had just come out, and the Marvel animated films with Lionsgate were just getting off the ground. I ended up working on several projects in animation for Craig Kyle, who sort of took me under his wing.

As I was finishing up my last year studying screenwriting, I got an amazing once-in-a-life-time-don't-blow-this-or-regret-it-forever type opportunity. Craig, who I'd staid in touch with asked Chris Yost—then story editor on *Fantastic Four: World's Greatest Heroes* to give me a call and offer me the chance to write an episode for the series. That episode was 'Hard Knocks' featuring the Hulk.

Now, I'll openly admit that Hulk was never my favorite character growing up. Actually, I found him outright boring. I was drawn to Marvel and comics in general (as were many of my generation) thanks to the X-Men and Spider-Man animated series of the 90s. The concurrent

Hulk series of the time just didn't do it for me. Never saw the appeal. But let me tell you... when I got offered this episode, I made Hulk my best buddy ever. And it's sort of funny, because Hulk and I have hung out A LOT during my time at Marvel.

A few weeks after I turned in my first script, Chris called me back and offered me another episode. This was really the first indication that I hadn't totally blown it. That episode was 'World's Tiniest Heroes' featuring Ant-Man (do you see an ironic pattern developing here?) While I was still working on that script, Craig called me and asked me to come work for him full time. I packed up shop (actually everything was still in boxes from my college move-out) and shipped myself out to LA in September of '05.

At that time, Marvel had just changed offices (literally the day before I started) to a much larger location in Beverly Hills. FF:WGH was already in full swing, *Ultimate Avengers 1 & 2* were both overseas being animated. *Invincible Iron Man* was about to wrap pre-production and *Doctor Strange* had just finished scripting. Plus a new Iron Man series and a new X-Men series were about to get green-lit. At the time the Marvel Animation department consisted of Craig Kyle and Eric Rollman... and that's it. So my timely addition to the team meant that I had to catch up quickly, but it also meant that I got to be deeply involved in just about everything almost right out of the gate.

Looking back, while it was exhausting work, I'm definitely glad that I got to work on so many projects. I racked up more experience (and more credits) than I think most producers would in twice the amount of time just because of all the different shows we were juggling simultaneously.

Q. So, inquiring, gossip-hound minds want to know! Why did you make the decision to leave? Did it have anything to do with Todd Casey coming over from DC?

It did have something to do with Todd Casey insofar as he was brought in to fill the development position that I had already decided to vacate. Our time at Marvel only overlapped for a couple weeks, but he seems totally cool and I have a feeling he'll do some good things for Marvel Animation.

There were a multitude of reasons why it was the right time for me to leave. The three big ones were that:

1) I moved to LA originally to be a writer. It's what I studied, what I know, and (believe it or not) what I'm best at. I followed the opportunity to become an animation producer because it presented itself—and I don't regret a minute of it. I had fun, I learned a ton, I was able to meet and work alongside some of the top talent in the medium, and I'm incredibly proud of the work we did. But producing wasn't ever really my passion. Writing is. Hopefully I'll get a chance to keep doing work in the

Marvel Universe from that side of things.

2) The second big reason was that I was—in all sincerity—exhausted. Unless you've worked in TV before, it's hard to describe just what a grind it is. It really is a tireless job, and as a Supervising Producer, if you want your show to be great, you really have to put in the time—all the time—to make sure every single aspect of it is great. In the last ten years, I've gone straight from a rigorous prep school experience to an intense (and wonderful) writing program at NYU Tisch, straight to free-lance writing (literally the week I finished school) straight to a full-time job at Marvel. And from there I just kept repeatedly diving in way over my head so that I could learn how to swim faster. I started producing *Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* when I was only 24 years old, while most of my friends were still trying to decide what field they wanted to go into. This was a good time for me to take a breather, step back, look around, and figure out what I actually want to do in the future.

3) The timing, with respect to the show, was good. I wouldn't abandon the show that I love (and have slaved over) or the fans who love it, unless the timing made sense. The first fourteen episodes of Season 2 were already completely finished (and most of my favorite

episodes of the series as a whole are within that bunch) along with a couple scattered episodes later in the season that were produced out of order. The remaining episodes were all in various stages of post-production. No decision had yet been made about Season 3, but the time was drawing near when I'd probably have to dive back into development on either Season 3 or a new show. I sort of stepped out of the fog of non-stop work for a moment as things were lightening up and realized that I needed a break for awhile. I've long wanted to spend some time travelling the world and this just seemed like the optimum time to hand the show over to other capable hands. Starting this fall, I'll be spending a year travelling all over the world, spending some quality hours—for the first time in a *long* time—in that universe that's not the Marvel one. (For the record I mean the *real* world, not the DC Universe.)

Q. Who is taking over your job, or is that a moot question until Season Three?

A combination of people. Kalia Cheng, one of the unsung heroes of Marvel Animation today, has taken over most of my responsibilities on wrapping up Avengers season 2, alongside Supervising Director Frank Paur, who's still hard at work. Kalia's sort of been the Maria Hill to my Nick Fury. But, you know, without that severe case of the grumpies. Maybe Amora / Loki is a better analogy.

And as mentioned above, Todd has come in to oversee any new projects that get up and running.

Q. What exactly does a Producer do? Can you walk us through the steps?

Interestingly, I just answered this on another interview I just recently finished. Please don't take offense, but I'm going to copy my answer here, because I'm not sure I could come up with a clearer or more thorough explanation!

It varies from medium to medium (live action vs. animation, film vs. TV, Marvel vs. anywhere else) and even from show to show, but I'll do my best to explain. This will be a good exercise, since most of my family still has no clue what it is that I actually do.

The short version is that a producer is responsible for making sure that the show is good. Plain and simple. If the show isn't good, it's probably the producer's fault. This isn't to undermine the contributions of the rest of the creative team in any way, it's to say that the producer is *responsible* for the contributions of the rest of the creative team. The level of involvement in any of these areas can vary depending on the producer and on the project, but some of the things that fall into a producer's camp are:

- Hiring the right creative staff to be on the show.
- Working with the show's story editor (and writers), supervising director (and directors), and designers to develop the show concept and show bible.
- Giving feedback and helping to manage every stage of development, pre-production, and post-production, including:
    - Story meetings
    - Script review
    - Storyboard review
    - Animatic review
    - Character, Background, and prop review (both line-art and color)
    - Casting
    - Working with the Voice Director and actors at recording sessions
    - Animation review and calling retakes (basically identifying flaws in the animation and explaining how the animation studio should correct the animation)
    - Edit sessions
    - Working with actors on ADR (additional dialogue recording, done after the episode's final animation is locked).
    - Music review
    - Sound fx review
    - Mix sessions (when the final sound mix of music, dialogue and fx are put together.)

In the creation of a series there are an immense number of moving parts. It's a producer's job to keep track of them all and to really have a view to the big picture, while still being as involved as possible on the little stuff. I like to say that if a show's great, it's because everyone on the team, from the designers to the directors to the actors to the writers did an outstanding job. If it isn't, it's because the producer didn't *get* them to do an outstanding job. A lot of it is catching mistakes or contradictions within an episode or the big picture of the series, or just pushing artists to do the best work that they can do; coming up with creative ideas in a pinch and bringing that overall vision to the table.

A lot of people might be reading this and wondering... well then, what does a director do? Because in live action movies a lot of this is as much the purview of the director as anything. In TV in general and especially in animation, a lot more of this falls into the lap of the producer (though there's still plenty of overlap.) You still have a Supervising Director who's responsible for the direction of the series as a whole as well as episodic directors, who are responsible for individual episodes.

The way it's broken down in a lot of our projects, the

creative staff is sort of split in two with the Story Editor (and his or her writers) on one side, and the Supervising Director and the Directors, design team etc. on the other. It's a gross over-simplification, but one way to think about it is that one side is responsible for the story, while the other is responsible for the visuals. And the producer lives in both worlds making them mesh.

Many folks are probably wondering what distinguishes the different kind of producers, and again it varies a lot, which is why there's no straight-forward definition. But some rough guidelines:

- Executive Producers are involved in the series on some higher level, usually not in a very hands-on day-to-day capacity. They've contributed something important, be it funding, creative oversight in a more removed capacity, or the creation of the show's concept / development.
- Supervising Producers are usually the final creative decision-makers (though they may also have to report to an Executive Producer.) But they're responsible for the more hands-on, day-to-day creative decisions that need to be made and all of the stuff I mentioned above.
- Line Producers are typically more focused on a

production's budget, schedule, staff hiring, and a lot of the gears that actually make a production run.
- Producers and Co-Producers could really be a subset of anything listed above, but typically work in some capacity underneath an Executive and/or Supervising Producer.
- Associate Producer again could represent any of the above but is considered one more rank down.

In addition to those responsibilities, as Director of Animation Development for Marvel I also had a whole slew of executive responsibilities. These can basically be summed up by saying that that part of my job was about making sure that Marvel and its business partners were getting everything they need out of the shows and from the production. This included (at times) preparing pitches and presentations to help sell shows to networks, working with our licensing division to help create style guides (that show how the characters and branding should appear on licensed product), working with partners like Hasbro to make sure that the shows meet their needs, working with broadcasters (once the show has been placed) to make sure they understand / are aware of what the show is / what it has to offer / what special event programming might be possible. Working with videogame partners and our publishing division on certain synergistic opportunities. Cross-pollinating ideas with the guys on the live action side. Getting up in front of 2000 people at

San Diego comic-con to get them excited about *Wolverine and the X-Men* season 2 (whoops). And all sorts of other assorted tasks.

Q. If AEMH Season One was your "Formation" season, and Season Two was your "Cosmic" season, how would you characterize a theoretical Season Three?

Hahaha, oh man. Season 2 hasn't even started yet and everyone's already fishing for info on Season 3. I won't pretend that I didn't have ideas for possible seasons 3 and 4 pretty well mapped out, but even if a third season were to move forward, it's unlikely that it would have any resemblance to the day dreams rattling around in my head. For one thing, most of the original creative team has already moved on to other work, including Chris Yost—who (from what I hear) is kicking ass in the Marvel writer's program.

That said, I've gotta give some juicy little tidbit to make it worth reading this far into the interview right? Okay, in my original four season plan, Season 3 was going to be the 'Magic' season. Chew on that!

Q. Once upon a time, there was said to be a plan to have AEMH and Wolverine & the X-Men share a common continuity. What can you tell us about that?

It's a pretty good story. *Wolverine and the X-Men* season 1

had wrapped up production. Supervising Producer Craig Kyle and moved on over to the live action division, where he was already producing the Thor film that just released in theaters. After a long wait, I finally got the green light to start development on *Wolverine and the X-Men* season 2. With Craig otherwise indisposed, I became the defacto Supervising Producer for season 2. Greg Johnson and I, along with the late (and amazing) Boyd Kirkland, got together and started working on the series bible along with the first 8 scripts of the season.

I happened to be simultaneously working on a show called *Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes*, and in my devious fan-boy mind, I saw an opportunity to create a new Marvel Animated Universe. So we planted some connectivity seeds early in Avengers—a reference to the MRD, a shot of Wendigo escaping from a S.H.I.E.L.D. super-prison. James Howlett on a WWII mission with Cap.

Likewise (but unbeknownst to the world at large) I was simultaneously working on the other side of things. Here's a new tidbit—Greg and I had started to flesh out plans for another Wolverine black ops mission for S.H.I.E.L.D. where he would team up with then S.H.I.E.L.D. agents Hawkeye and Black Widow (yeah, it was going to take place before the events of AEMH.) I had vague notions about Hank

McCoy paying a visit to fellow biologist (and fellow Hank) Hank Pym.

But the financing fell out from underneath WX season 2 before my mad machinations got too far along. You won't see anything further in Avengers: EMH that confirms continuity. And—I could be wrong about this (I'm sure someone will be more than happy to point out if/when I am) I don't think you'll see anything to openly contradict it either. Don't take that as a sign of who might be appearing or what might happen—I promise, it tells you nothing.

But basically, if fans want to believe they exist in the same universe, they can. If they don't, they can do that too.

Q. Do you think Spectacular Spider-Man might have joined that same continuity, had it continued?

Further into my deep, twisted scheming, I did have some thoughts on how to get Spec Spidey in on the fun. It would have had to be handled delicately and in the most oblique possible ways, because Spectacular was a show run by Sony and legally we couldn't do any kind of blatant cross-over. But that show's next season became a no-go right around the same time as Wolverine's. So all those MAU rattlings got filed away for a rainy day.

Q. What plans did you want to execute in the AEMH but didn't have a chance? Guest stars? Villains?

One that I've already mentioned of course is Taskmaster. He's on of my favorite Avengers Universe villains, but we just didn't find the right place in the first season or two to showcase him. Same goes for Mad Thinker. Chris and I were really close a couple of times to having him as the headlining villain of an episode, but each time we just couldn't quite make it work. I'm glad Chris was able to get him into one of the tie-in comics.

There are several heroes that I was specifically saving for Season 3. Given my clue above, you might be able to guess some of them. Same goes for villains. The Avengers universe is so huge, with so many great stories to revisit... there was just no way to get it all into two seasons. But we do cover a heck of a lot of ground, and I'm proud of the way it came together.

Q. What is next for Joshua Fine? Vegas? Tahiti? Another animated show?

Ironically, you're not far off with your guesses. I'm taking a year off to travel the world. I'll be keeping a blog as I go, which I'll make sure fans are aware of in case you want to hear all about my misadventures in the real world. From now on I hope to be doing lots of writing—for animation,

for videogames, for comics, prose, poetry, tv, movies, Marvel, not-Marvel. You name it.

It's been a privilege to create for you and I hope you all continue to follow my work. I'll try to bring the same level of quality that Avengers has to everything I work on.

Q. What is your greatest regret regarding AEMH? W&tXM? Spectacular Spider-Man? Fantastic Four?

I don't have too many regrets. Like everyone, I wish that all of those shows could (have) continue(d) forever. But I'm proud of what we did do. I'm especially proud that each one of the projects I worked on is pretty radically different from one another. To folks on the outside looking in, it may all just look like "Super Hero cartoons" but hopefully those who have seen all of these shows can now see just how far that definition can be stretched in different directions.

Q. What was your favorite project that ended up not being made?

Wow, that's hard one—I worked on a bunch! The one that's probably my favorite is one that I actually can't talk about, since it might see life at some point (and it's not something you'd expect in your wildest dreams.) From what I can talk about, I'd say development of a Thor series that wasn't to be. It was before the live action got up and running, and ultimately, I think, just not the direction that the franchise would ultimately take. But there was some neat stuff in there.

Q) I know you're probably not going to answer this (spoilers and all), but in this, the Cosmic Season, do we get any mention of Nova or the Nova Corps, especially as regards the Guardians of the Galaxy?

Oh man, I really would like to answer that question, because the answer is kind of fascinating. Ask me again at the end of Season 2.

Q) Is it true that Loki knows where Jimmy Hoffa is buried? He seems to be behind everything else.

It's not a secret that the super-smart villains are my favorites. I love working with the guys, like Leader and Mad Thinker and my favorite of all, Loki, who have things figured out twenty-six episodes ahead of time. Guys who have their hands in everything.

Q) It was implied, but never explicitly stated, that Loki caused the failures of the super-prisons. Was it indeed him, or is that still a mystery?

[SEASON 1 SPOILER AHEAD – DO NOT READ UNLESS YOU'VE SEEN THE END – IDEALLY BECAUSE YOU'RE FROM AUSTRALIA]

Yes, Loki caused the Super-Villain breakout. We threw out a ton of red herrings in the first several episodes, but despite all that, we didn't seem to really fool most of the

hardcore fanbase. I think it was probably a bigger and more fun mystery for those that hadn't experienced the Marvel Universe before.

But for dedicated Avengers fans, Chris's and my devotion to the original books sort of worked against us on this one. (Sort of like the way the same fans were screaming "triple agent!" at Black Widow the moment her micro-episode ended.) This was our way to have a bigger over-arching plot and mystery for the season, have a huge, action-packed, chaotic premiere, and also still have Loki be ultimately responsible for the formation of the Avengers. That's some serious simultaneous cake having and eating going on.

But, and I'll emphasize this because there are some dots that fans still haven't fully connected yet, Loki is indirectly behind even more than he's been accredited. And this isn't a wait-and-see scenario, as there's one important point that won't be spelled out in later episodes. Good hunting (or epileptic trees-ing as the case may be.)

Q) Its been said that the previously planned materials for a Hulk series and a Thor series were leveraged and folded into the AEMH material. Did that change what you folks had planned, or was it done early enough such that there was no actual change, as such?

I had finished developing a series called Hulk: Gamma Corps awhile back, which just didn't seem like it was going to get the full green light to production. But some of the character designs (by Ciro Nieli) and a few of the concepts—specifically the mechanics of Leader's transformative gamma energy and booster packs—were really cool. In addition to featuring Hulk, that series was going to have Hawkeye and Black Panther in it. It would have been a shame to see all that good work go to waste, so—given some of it as a jumping off point—we got the powers that be to green light an Avengers series.

Less than I expected actually made the jump from Gamma Corps to Avengers. Hulk's, Hawkeye's, and Panther's designs all have similarities to their looks from that show, but they all got redressed to a more classic Marvel Universe take. I will say though that part of the appeal of having a whole Gamma Prison as one of our four prisons, and of doing a big two-parter with Leader and his horde stemmed from the work I did on Gamma Corps. A lot of the details didn't make the jump, but I think the reason Leader turned out as cool as he did and as prominently as he did in season 1 owes its origin to Gamma Corps.

The Thor series played less of a role here, although I won't say no role. After Tales of Asgard, Greg Johnson and I had

a lot of brainstorm sessions to flesh out a thorough vision of the nine realms. What does each realm look like? Who are its denizens? How are they connected? I had a hand drawn map hanging on the wall of my Marvel office for a long time with a lot of this information, which was eventually tapped by one of our amazing painters to create the way-too-brief Asgardian map of the realms that you see overlayed on Thor's face in episode 024. That thing was absolutely beautiful. I've gotta track that down actually, it'd make a great featurette.

Q) The Black Panther and Captain America had explicit origin segments, as did Carol Danvers. Iron Man, Hulk, Ant-Man, Wasp, and Thor have not; what was the reasoning behind this?

For Iron Man and Hulk, we were following pretty tightly on the heels of the theatrical continuity. It didn't really feel like we needed to retread those stories yet again, especially since we didn't really contradict them. We could pretty much point to those movies and say "there's the origin." Showcasing their actual origins also wouldn't have set up the Breakout in the most efficient way, which was a bigger priority.

For Thor... well, he doesn't really have an origin. He is who he is. He didn't become that by a radioactive hammer bite

or anything. Then again, another way of looking at it is that the entirety of season 1 is Thor's classic origin story. Thor's arc for the season is the same as it was in the early books—finding humility amongst mortals. We handle it a little differently for the sake of the Loki plot twist, Thor has exiled himself to Midgard out of arrogance (arrogantly believing he's the only one who can protect the fragile mortals) rather than being cast out by his father for the same reason. But the connection is definitely there, as his exile is still the result of an argument with his father. I'd also like to think that Odin had a pretty good sense of the lesson Thor needed to learn. Listen to his argument with Thor in episode 002 and the resolution at the end of 026 and realize, Odin was right.

Cap could have gone either way, but his brief news-reel origin helped us in a bunch of ways. It helped set the tone for the WWII era episode, it helped us set up Kang watching archival footage, and it explained exactly who Cap was, since he wouldn't be showing up again until later. It also let us do some nice bookending with the newsreel of the Cap / Bucky statue that would play a part in episode 009.

Black Panther's origin was integral to his arc and to episodes that the whole team would be involved in down

the line. In and of itself, it's also one of the most touching Black Panther stories we could tell, so why *not* do it?

Ant-Man and Wasp is probably the biggest question mark. At the end of the day, I think the literal origin of Ant-Man discovering Pym particles wasn't as important as just setting him up as a cool character that you want to see more of. And again, setting up events that would become relevant later for the Avengers. Of those above though, Ant-Man and Wasp are the only ones that we later considered flashing back to an origin for—or at least an explanation of how and when they met. This was very nearly the subject matter of episode 015, but the episode was already pretty crowded and something had to give.

Follow me on Twitter @Josh_Fine for more random tidbits as I think of them!